

# Conversion of Augustine



by Saint John Henry Newman



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# Introduction

This little book should be interesting not only because of the man and the event it deals with but also because of the writer and the writing.

The likeness between Saint Augustine and Cardinal Newman is very striking. Whatever difference exists is but the accident of distance. Transposing both from the ends of fifteen centuries of years we can conceive of either as doing exactly what the other did.



It was this kinship of mind which enabled Newman to interpret the life of Augustine so faithfully and to write of his conversion as no one else had written before him or ever will write. Indeed there is no need for further writing. Whoever reads this sketch knows Saint Augustine - sees the soul of him laid bare by the most sympathetic hand that ever put kind and gentle thoughts into perfect language. Was Newman thinking of his own dark hour while he wrote? There can be little doubt of it. And so we have the story of two strangely beautiful lives compiled and complete in one short chapter.

For who can write of sorrow but who has wept? or who can tell of strife but who has striven? or who can sing of victory but who has fought and won? Newman's language here is high art. He does not waste words on little things or even on big things: he takes the great things in the saint's career and with a few bold strokes the picture is complete, perfect. He met Augustine soul to soul and he tells us what he saw.

The object in reprinting this sketch is to give the people of Saint Augustine's parish a knowledge of their patron. This knowledge cannot ever be conveyed so well as in the words of Newman. And in a spiritual way it must be helpful. What better means can be used for leading sinners to repentance or for guiding those who are groping darkly towards the light than to put before them the life of one who did himself sin and sorrow for it - blazing a trail for us to the kingdom of heaven through obstacles which appear insurmountable but are not?

There is yet another object and it is this: The parish lies at the very gates of a great university. In all modern secular schools of higher learning there is unquestionably an atmosphere of unfaith in formal Christianity and a general assumption that religious belief and practice are incompatible with high intellectual culture. I do not say this in a fault-finding or damnatory spirit: I merely state what is generally conceived to be a fact, and the friends of the universities will not object to it; why should they? Now, whether we admit it or not, the greater number of us take whatever beliefs we may have on the authority of others, of men whom we know to be our superiors intellectually, whose characters we admire and whose opinions we respect. Of course there are those who like to strike the intellectual pose, who wish to have it thought that they work out all the problems of life for themselves by themselves, but they are not to be taken seriously. The many follow the beaten way to conviction - "our fathers have told us" - and as at present "our fathers" happen to be, for the most part, men who do not believe in Divine Revelation, it is very natural that those who sit at their feet should think with them. A knowledge of the lives and characters of the two men brought together in this little book will help to meet this difficulty. We need make no apology, nor may we take any shame to ourselves for that we belong to a Church which reckoned among her most

loyally obedient children such minds as Saint Augustine and Cardinal Newman.

- *James McDonald*

# Conversion of Augustine

"Thou hast chastised me and I was instructed, as a steer unaccustomed to the yoke. Convert me, and I shall be converted, for Thou art the Lord my God. For after Thou didst convert me, I did penance, and after Thou didst show unto me, I struck my thigh. I am confounded and ashamed, because I have borne the reproach of my youth."  
- *Jeremiah 31:18,19*



Augustine was the son of a pious mother, who had the pain of witnessing, for many years, his wanderings in doubt and unbelief, who prayed incessantly for his conversion, and at length was blessed with the sight of it. From early youth he had given himself up to a course of life quite inconsistent with the profession of a catechumen, into which he had been admitted in infancy. How far he had fallen into any great excesses is doubtful. He uses language of himself which may have the worst of meanings, but may, on the other hand, be but the expression of deep repentance and spiritual sensitiveness. In his twentieth year he embraced the Manichaeian heresy, in which he continued nine years. Towards the end of that time, leaving Africa, his native country, first for Rome, then for Milan, he fell in with Saint Ambrose; and his conversion and baptism followed in the course of his thirty-fourth year. This memorable event, his conversion, has been celebrated in the Western Church from early times, being the only event of the kind thus distinguished, excepting the conversion of Saint Paul.

His life had been for many years one of great anxiety and discomfort, the life of one dissatisfied with himself, and despairing of finding the truth. Men of ordinary minds are not so circumstanced as to feel the misery of irreligion. That misery consists in the perverted and discordant action of the various faculties and functions of the soul, which have lost their legitimate governing power, and are unable to regain it, except at the hands of their Maker. Now the run of irreligious men do not suffer in any great degree from this disorder, and are not miserable; they have neither great talents nor strong passions; they have not within them the materials of rebellion in such measure as to threaten their peace. They follow their own wishes, they yield to the bent of the moment, they act on inclination, not on principle, but their motive powers are neither strong nor various enough to be troublesome. Their minds are in no sense under rule; but anarchy is not in their case a state of confusion, but of deadness; not unlike the internal condition as it is reported of eastern cities and provinces at present, in which, though the government is weak or null, the body politic goes on without any great embarrassment or collision of its members one with another, by the force of inveterate habit. It is very different when the moral and intellectual principles are vigorous, active, and developed. Then, if the governing power be feeble, all the subordinates are in the position of rebels in arms; and what the state of a mind is under such circumstances, the analogy of a civil community will suggest to us. Then we have before us the melancholy spectacle of high aspirations without an aim, a hunger of the soul unsatisfied, and a never-ending restlessness and inward warfare of its various faculties. Gifted minds, if not submitted to the rightful authority of religion, become the most unhappy and the most mischievous. They need both an object to feed upon, and the power of self-mastery; and the love of their Maker, and nothing but it, supplies both the one and the other. We have seen in our day, in the case of a

popular poet, an impressive instance of a great genius throwing off the fear of God, seeking for happiness in the creature, roaming unsatisfied from one object to another, breaking his soul upon itself, and bitterly confessing and imparting his wretchedness to all around him. I have no wish at all to compare him to Saint Augustine; indeed, if we may say it without presumption, the very different termination of their trial seems to indicate some great difference in their respective modes of encountering it. The one dies of premature decay, to all appearance, a hardened infidel; and if he is still to have a name, will live in the mouths of men by writings at once blasphemous and immoral: the other is a Saint and Doctor of the Church. Each makes confessions, the one to the saints, the other to the powers of evil. And does not the difference of the two discover itself in some measure, even to our eyes, in the very history of their wanderings and pinings? At least, there is no appearance in Saint Augustine's case of that dreadful haughtiness, sullenness, love of singularity, vanity, irritability, and misanthropy, which were too certainly the characteristics of our own countryman. Augustine was, as his early history shows, a man of affectionate and tender feelings, and open and amiable temper; and, above all, he sought for some excellence external to his own mind, instead of concentrating all his contemplations on himself.

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But let us consider what his misery was; it was that of a mind imprisoned, solitary, and wild with spiritual thirst; and forced to betake itself to the strongest excitements, by way of relieving itself of the rush and violence of feelings, of which the knowledge of the Divine Perfections was the true and sole sustenance. He ran into excess, not from love of it, but from this fierce fever of mind. "I sought what I might love," he says in his Confessions, "in love with loving, and



safety I hated, and a way without snares. For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God; yet throughout that famine I was not hungered, but was without any longing for incorruptible sustenance, not because filled therewith, but the more empty, the more I loathed it. For this cause my soul was sickly and full of sores; it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense." - 3:1

"O foolish man that I then was," he says elsewhere, "enduring impatiently the lot of man! So I fretted, sighed, wept, was distracted; had neither rest nor counsel. For I bore about a shattered and bleeding soul, impatient of being borne by me, yet where to repose it I found not; not in calm groves, nor in games and music, nor in fragrant spots, nor in curious banquetings, nor in indulgence of the bed and the couch, nor, finally, in books or poetry found it repose. All things looked ghastly, yea, the very light. In groaning and tears alone found I a little refreshment. But when my soul was withdrawn from them, a huge load of misery weighed me down. To Thee, O Lord, it ought to have been raised, for Thee to lighten; I knew it, but neither could nor would; the more, since when I thought of Thee, Thou wast not to me any solid or substantial thing. For Thou wert not Thyself, but a mere phantom, and my error was my God. If I offered to discharge my load thereon, that it might rest, it glided through the void, and came rushing down against me; and I had remained to myself a hapless spot, where I could neither be, nor be from thence. For whither should my heart flee from my heart? whither should I flee from myself? whither not follow myself? And yet I fled out of my country, for so should mine eyes look less for him, where they were not wont to see him." - 4:12

He is speaking in this last sentence of a friend he had lost, whose death-bed was very remarkable, and whose dear

familiar name he apparently has not courage to mention. "He had grown up from a child with me," he says, "and we had been both schoolfellows and play-fellows." Augustine had misled him into the heresy which he had adopted himself, and when he grew to have more and more sympathy in Augustine's pursuits, the latter united himself to him in a closer intimacy. Scarcely had he thus given him his heart, when God took him.

"Thou tookest him," he says, "out of this life, when he had scarce completed one whole year of my friendship, sweet to me above all sweetness in that life of mine. A long while, sore sick of a fever, he lay senseless in the dews of death, and being given over, he was baptized unwitting; I, meanwhile little regarding, or presuming that his soul would retain rather what it had received of me than what was wrought on his unconscious body."

The Manichees, it should be observed, rejected baptism. He proceeds:

"But it proved far otherwise; for he was refreshed and restored. Forthwith, as soon as I could speak with him (and I could as soon as he was able, for I never left him, and we hung but too much upon each other), I essayed to jest with him, as though he would jest with me at that baptism, which he had received, when utterly absent in mind and feeling, but had now understood that he had received. But he shrunk from me, as from an enemy; and with a wonderful and sudden freedom bade me, if I would continue his friend, forbear such language to him. I, all astonished and amazed, suppressed all my emotions till he should grow well, and his health were strong enough for me to deal with him as I would. But he was taken away from my madness, that with Thee he might be preserved for my comfort: a few days

after, in my absence, he was attacked again by fever, and so departed." - 4:8

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From distress of mind Augustine left his native place, Thagaste, and came to Carthage, where he became a teacher in rhetoric. Here he fell in with Faustus, an eminent Manichean bishop and disputant, in whom, however, he was disappointed; and the disappointment abated his attachment to his sect, and disposed him to look for truth elsewhere. Disgusted with the licence which prevailed among the students at Carthage, he determined to proceed to Rome, and disregarding and eluding the entreaties of his mother, Monica, who dreaded his removal from his own country, he went thither. At Rome he resumed his profession; but inconveniences as great, though of another kind, encountered him in that city; and upon the people of Milan sending for a rhetoric reader, he made application for the appointment, and obtained it. To Milan then he came, the city of Saint Ambrose, in the year of our Lord 385.

Ambrose, though weak in voice, had the reputation of eloquence; and Augustine, who seems to have gone with introductions to him, and was won by his kindness of manner, attended his sermons with curiosity and interest. "I listened," he says, "not in the frame of mind which became me, but in order to see whether his eloquence answered what was reported of it: I hung on his words attentively, but of the matter I was but an unconcerned and contemptuous hearer." - 5:23 His impression of his style of preaching is worth noticing: \*'I was delighted with the sweetness of his discourse, more full of knowledge, yet in manner less pleasurable and soothing, than that of Faustus." Augustine was insensibly moved; he determined on leaving the Manichees, and returning to the state of a catechumen in

the Catholic Church, into which he had been admitted by his parents. He began to eye and muse upon the great bishop of Milan more and more, and tried in vain to penetrate his secret heart, and to ascertain the thoughts and feelings which swayed him. He felt he did not understand him. If the respect and intimacy of the great could make a man happy, these advantages he perceived Ambrose to possess; yet he was not satisfied that he was a happy man. His celibacy seemed a drawback: what constituted his hidden life? or was he cold at heart? or was he of a famished and restless spirit? He felt his own malady, and longed to ask him some questions about it. But Ambrose could not easily be spoken with. Though accessible to all, yet that very circumstance made it difficult for an individual, especially one who was not of his flock, to get a private interview with him. When he was not taken up with the Christian people who surrounded him, he was either at his meals or engaged in private reading. Augustine used to enter, as all persons might, without being announced; but after staying awhile, afraid of interrupting him, he departed again. However, he heard his expositions of Scripture every Sunday, and gradually made progress.

He was now in his thirtieth year, and since he was a youth of eighteen had been searching after truth; yet he was still "in the same mire, greedy of things present," but finding nothing stable.

"Tomorrow," he said to himself, "I shall find it; it will appear manifestly, and I shall grasp it: lo, Faustus the Manichee will come and clear everything! O you great men, ye academics, is it true, then, that no certainty can be attained for the ordering of life? Nay, let us search diligently, and despair not. Lo, things in the ecclesiastical books are not absurd to us now, which sometime seemed absurd, and may be otherwise taken and in a good sense. I will take my stand

where, as a child, my parents placed me, until the clear truth be found out. But where shall it be sought, or when? Ambrose has no leisure; we have no leisure to read; where shall we find even the books? where, or when, procure them? Let set times be appointed, and certain hours be ordered for the health of our soul. Great hope has dawned; the Catholic faith teaches not what we thought; and do we doubt to knock, that the rest may be opened? The forenoons, indeed, our scholars take up; what do we during the rest of our time? why not this? But if so, when pay we court to our great friend, whose favours we need; when compose what we may sell to scholars? when refresh ourselves, unbending our minds from this intenseness of care?

"Perish every thing: dismiss we these empty vanities; and betake ourselves to the one search for truth! Life is a poor thing, death is uncertain; if it surprises us in what state shall we depart hence; and when shall we learn what here we have neglected? and shall we not rather suffer the punishment of this negligence? What if death itself cut off and end all care and feeling? Then must this be ascertained. But God forbid this! It is no vain and empty thing, that the excellent dignity of the Christian faith has overspread the whole world. Never would such and so great things be wrought for us by God, if with the body the soul also came to an end. Wherefore delay then to abandon worldly hopes, and give ourselves wholly to seek after God and the blessed life? But wait; even those things are pleasant; they have some and no small sweetness. We must not lightly abandon them, for it were a shame to return again to them. See, how great a matter it is now to obtain some station, and then what should we wish for more? We have store of powerful friends; if nothing else offers, and we be in much haste, at least a presidency may be given us; and a wife with some fortune, that she increase not our charges; and this shall be



the bound of desire. Many great men, and most worthy of imitation, have given themselves to the study of wisdom in the state of marriage." - *6:18,19*

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In spite of this reluctance to give up a secular life, yet in proportion as the light of Christian truth opened on Augustine's mind, so was he drawn on to that higher Christian state on which our Lord and His Apostle have bestowed special praise. So it was, and not unnaturally in those times, that high and earnest minds, when they had found the truth, were not content to embrace it by halves; they would take all or none, they would go all lengths, they would covet the better gifts, or else they would remain as they were. It seemed to them absurd to take so much trouble to find the truth, and to submit to such a revolution in their opinions and motives as its reception involved; and yet, after all, to content themselves with a second-best profession, unless there was some plain duty obliging them to live the secular life they had hitherto led. The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, the pomp of life, the pride of station, and the indulgence of sense, would be tolerated by the Christian, then only, when it would be a sin to renounce them. The pursuit of gain may be an act of submission to the will of parents; a married life is the performance of a solemn and voluntary vow; but it may often happen, and did happen in Augustine's day especially, that there are no religious reasons against a man's giving up the world, as our Lord and His Apostles renounced it. When his parents were heathen or were Christians of his own high temper, when he had no fixed engagement or position in life, when the State itself was either infidel or but partially emerging out of its old pollutions, and when grace was given to desire and strive after, if not fully to reach, the sanctity of the Lamb's virginal company, duty would often lie, not in

shunning, but in embracing an ascetic life. Besides, the Church in the fourth century had had no experience yet of temporal prosperity; she knew religion only amid the storms of persecution, or the uncertain lull between them, in the desert or the catacomb, in insult, contempt and calumny. She had not yet seen how opulence, and luxury, and splendour, and pomp, and polite refinement, and fashion, were compatible with the Christian name; and her more serious children imagined, with a simplicity or narrowness of mind which will in this day provoke a smile that they ought to imitate Cyprian and Dionysius in their mode of living and their habits, as well as in their feelings, professions, and spiritual knowledge. They thought that religion consisted in deeds, not words. Riches, power, rank, and literary eminence, were then thought misfortunes, when viewed apart from the service they might render to the cause of truth; the atmosphere of the world was thought unhealthy: - Augustine then, in proportion as he approached the Church, ascended towards heaven. Time went on; he was in his thirty-second year; he still was gaining light; he renounced his belief in fatalism; he addressed himself to Saint Paul's Epistles. He began to give up the desire of distinction in his profession: this was a great step; however, still his spirit mounted higher than his heart as yet could follow.

"I was displeased," he says, "that I led a secular life; yea, now that my desires no longer inflamed me, as of old, with hopes of honour and profit, a very grievous burden it was to undergo so heavy a bondage. For in comparison of Thy sweetness, and 'the beauty of Thy honour, which I loved,' these things delighted me no longer. But I still was enthralled with the love of woman: nor did the Apostle forbid me to marry, although he advised me to something better, chiefly wishing that all men were as he himself. But I, being weak, chose the more indulgent place; and, because of this alone, was tossed up and down in all beside, faint and

wasted with withering cares, because in other matters I was constrained, against my will, to conform myself to a married life, to which I was given up and enthralled. I had now found the goodly pearl, which, selling all that I had, I ought to have bought; and I hesitated." - 8:3

Finding Ambrose, though kind and accessible, yet reserved, he went to an aged man named Simplician, who, as some say, baptized Saint Ambrose, and eventually succeeded him in his see. He opened his mind to him, and happening in the course of his communications to mention Victorinus's translation of some Platonic works, Simplician asked him if he knew that person's history. It seems he was a professor of rhetoric at Rome, was well versed in literature and philosophy, had been tutor to many of the senators, and had received the high honour of a statue in the Forum. Up to his old age he had professed, and defended with his eloquence, the old pagan worship. He was led to read the Holy Scriptures, and was brought, in consequence, to a belief in their divinity. For awhile he did not feel the necessity of changing his profession; he looked upon Christianity as a philosophy, he embraced it as such, but did not propose to join what he considered the Christian sect, or, as Christians would call it, the Catholic Church. He let Simplician into his secret; but whenever the latter pressed him to take the step, he was accustomed to ask, "whether walls made a Christian." However, such a state could not continue with a man of earnest mind: the leaven worked; at length he unexpectedly called upon Simplician to lead him to church. He was admitted a catechumen, and in due time baptized, "Rome wondering, the Church rejoicing." It was customary at Rome for the candidates for baptism to profess their faith from a raised place in the church, in a set form of words. An offer was made to Victorinus, which was not unusual in the case of bashful and timid persons, to make his profession in private. But he preferred to make it in the ordinary way. "I

was public enough," he made answer, "in my profession of rhetoric, and ought not to be frightened when professing salvation." He continued the school which he had before he became a Christian, till the edict of Julian forced him to close it. This story went to Augustine's heart, but it did not melt it. There was still the struggle of two wills, the high aspiration and the habitual inertness.

"I was weighed down with the encumbrance of this world, pleasantly, as one is used to be with sleep; and my meditations upon Thee were like the efforts of men who would awake, yet are steeped again under the depth of their slumber. And as no one would wish always to be asleep, and, in the sane judgment of all, waking is better, yet a man commonly delays to shake off sleep, when a heavy torpor is on his limbs, and though it is time to rise, he enjoys it the more heartily while he ceases to approve it: so, in spite of my conviction that Thy love was to be obeyed rather than my own lusts, yet I both yielded to the approval, and was taken prisoner by the enjoyment. When Thou saidst to me, 'Rise, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ will enlighten thee,' and showedst the plain reasonableness of Thy word, convinced by its truth, I could but give the slow and sleepy answer, 'Presently;' 'yes, presently;' 'wait awhile;' though that presently was never present, and that awhile became long. It was in vain that I delighted in Thy law in the inner man, while another law in my members fought against the law of my mind, and led me captive to the law of sin, which was in my members." - 8:12

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One day, when he and his friend Alypius were together at their home, a countryman, named Pontitian, who held an office in the imperial court, called on him on some matter of business. As they sat talking, he observed a book upon the

table, and on opening it found it was Saint Paul's Epistles. A strict Christian himself, he was agreeably surprised to find an Apostle, where he expected to meet with some work bearing upon Augustine's profession. The discourse fell upon Saint Antony, the celebrated Egyptian solitary, and while it added to Pontitian's surprise to find that they did not even know his name, they, on the other hand, were still more struck with wonder at the relation of his Life, and the recent date of it. Thence the conversation passed to the subject of monasteries, the purity and sweetness of their discipline, and the treasures of grace which through them had been manifested in the desert. It turned out that Augustine and his friend did not even know of the monastery, of which Ambrose had been the patron, outside the walls of Milan. Pontitian went on to give an account of the conversion of two among his fellow-officers under the following circumstances. When he was at Treves, one afternoon, while the emperor was in the circus, he happened to stroll out, with three companions, into the gardens close upon the city wall. After a time they split into two parties, and while he and another went their own way, the other two came upon a cottage, which they were induced to enter. It was the abode of certain recluses, "poor in spirit," as Augustine says, "of whom is the kingdom of heaven;" and here they found the life of Saint Antony, which Athanasius had written about twenty years before (a.d. 364 - 366). One of them began to peruse it; and, moved by the narrative, they both of them resolved on adopting the monastic life.

The effect produced by this relation on Augustine was not less than was caused by the history of Antony itself upon the imperial officers, and almost as immediately productive of a religious issue. He felt that they did but represent to him, in their obedience, what was wanting in his own, and suggest a remedy for his disordered and troubled state of mind. He says:



"The more ardently I loved these men, whose healthful state of soul was shown in surrendering themselves to Thee for healing, so much the more execrable and hateful did I seem to myself in comparison of them. For now many years had passed with me, as many perhaps as twelve, since my nineteenth, when, upon reading Cicero's 'Hortensius,' I was first incited to seek for wisdom; and still I was putting off renunciation of earthly happiness, and simple search after a treasure which, even in the search, not to speak of the discovery, was better than the actual possession of heathen wealth and power, and than the pleasures of sense poured around me at my will. But I, wretched, wretched youth, in that springtime of my life, had asked indeed of Thee the gift of chastity, but had said, 'Give me chastity and continence, but not at once.' I feared, alas, lest Thou shouldst hear me too soon, and cure a thirst at once, which I would fain have satisfied, not extinguished . . . But now . . . disturbed in countenance as well as mind, I turn upon Alypius, 'What ails us?' say I, 'what is this? what is this story? See; the unlearned rise and take heaven by violence, while we, with all our learning, all our want of heart, see where we wallow in flesh and blood! Shall I feel shame to follow their lead, and not rather to let alone what alone is left to me?' Something of this kind I said to him, and while he eyed me in silent wonder, I rushed from him in the ferment of my feelings." - *13:17,19*

He betook himself to the garden of the house where he lodged, Alypius following him, and sat for awhile in bitter meditation on the impotence and slavery of the human will. The thought of giving up his old habits of life once for all pressed upon him with overpowering force, and, on the other hand, the beauty of religious obedience pierced and troubled him. He says:

"The very toys of toys, and vanities of vanities, my old mistresses, kept hold of me; they plucked my garment of flesh, and whispered softly, 'Are you indeed giving us up? What! from this moment are we to be strangers to you for ever? This and that, shall it be allowed you from this moment never again?' Yet, what a view began to open on the other side, whither I had set my face and was in a flutter to go; the chaste majesty of Continency, serene, cheerful, yet without excess, winning me in a holy way to come without doubting, and ready to embrace me with religious hands full stored with honourable patterns! So many boys and young maidens, a multitude of youth and every age, grave widows and aged virgins, and Continnence herself in all, not barren, but a fruitful mother of children, of joys by Thee, O Lord, her Husband. She seemed to mock me into emulation, saying, 'Canst not thou what these have done, youths and maidens? Can they in their own strength or in the strength of their Lord God? The Lord their God gave me unto them. Why rely on thyself and fall? Cast thyself upon His arm. Be not afraid. He will not let you slip. Cast thyself in confidence, He will receive thee and heal thee.' Meanwhile Alypius kept close to my side, silently waiting for the end of my unwonted agitation."

He then proceeds to give an account of the termination of his struggle:

"At length burst forth a mighty storm, bringing a mighty flood of tears; and to indulge it to the full, even unto cries, in solitude, I rose up from Alypius, who perceived from my choked voice how it was with me. He remained where we had been sitting, in deep astonishment. I threw myself down under a fig-tree, I know not how, and allowing my tears full vent, offered up to Thee the acceptable sacrifice of my streaming eyes. And I cried out to this effect: 'And Thou, O Lord, how long, how long, Lord, wilt Thou be angry? For

ever? Remember not our old sins!' for I felt that they were my tyrants. I cried out, piteously, 'How long? how long? tomorrow and tomorrow? why not now? why not in this very hour put an end to this my vileness?' While I thus spoke, with tears, in the bitter contrition of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice, as if from a house near me, of a boy or girl chanting forth again and again, 'take up and read, take up and read!' Changing countenance at these words, I began intently to think whether boys used them in any game, but could not recollect that I had ever heard them. I left weeping and rose up, considering it a divine intimation to open the Scriptures and read what first presented itself. I had heard that Antony had come in during the reading of the Gospel, and had taken to himself the admonition, 'Go, sell all that thou hast,' etc., and had turned to Thee at once, in consequence of that oracle. I had left Saint Paul's volume where Alypius was sitting, when I rose thence. I returned thither, seized it, opened, and read in silence the following passage, which first met my eyes, 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.' I had neither desire nor need to read farther. As I finished the sentence, as though the light of peace had been poured into my heart, all the shadows of doubt dispersed. Thus hast Thou converted me to Thee, so as no longer to seek either for wife or other hope of this world, standing fast in that rule of faith in which Thou so many years before hadst revealed me to my mother." - *8:26-30*

The last words of this extract relate to a dream which his mother had had some years before, concerning his conversion. On his first turning Manichee, abhorring his opinions, she would not for awhile even eat with him, when she had this dream, in which she had an intimation that where she stood, there Augustine should one day be with

her. At another time she derived great comfort from the casual words of a bishop, who, when importuned by her to converse with her son, said at length with some impatience, "Go thy ways, and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish!" It would be out of place, and is perhaps unnecessary, to enter here into the affecting and well-known history of her tender anxieties and persevering prayers for Augustine. Suffice it to say, she saw the accomplishment of them; she lived till Augustine became a Catholic; and she died in her way back to Africa with him. Her last words were, "Lay this body anywhere; let not the care of it in any way distress you; this only I ask, that wherever you be, you remember me at the Altar of the Lord."

"May she," says her son, in dutiful remembrance of her words, "rest in peace with her husband, before and after whom she never had any; whom she obeyed, with patience bringing forth fruit unto Thee, that she might win him also unto Thee. And inspire, O Lord my God, inspire Thy servants, my brethren, Thy sons, my masters, whom, in heart, voice, and writing I serve, that so many as read these confessions, may at Thy altar remember Monica, Thy handmaid, with Patricius, her sometime husband, from whom Thou broughtest me into this life; how, I know not. May they with pious affection remember those who were my parents in this transitory light, - my brethren under Thee, our Father, in our Catholic Mother, - my fellow-citizens in the eternal Jerusalem, after which Thy pilgrim people sigh from their going forth unto their return: that so, her last request of me may in the prayers of many receive a fulfillment, through my confessions, more abundant than through my prayers." -

9:37

\* \* \*

But to return to Saint Augustine himself. His conversion took place in the summer of 386 (as seems most probable), and about three weeks after it, taking advantage of the vintage holidays, he gave up his school, assigning as a reason a pulmonary attack which had given him already much uneasiness. He retired to a friend's villa in the country for the rest of the year, with a view of preparing himself for baptism at the Easter following. His religious notions were still very imperfect and vague. He had no settled notion concerning the nature of the soul, and was ignorant of the mission of the Holy Ghost. And still more, as might be expected, he needed correction and reformation in his conduct. During this time he broke himself of a habit of profane swearing, and, in various ways, disciplined himself for the sacred rite for which he was a candidate. It need scarcely be said that he was constant in devotional and penitential exercises.

In due time the sacrament of baptism was administered to him by Saint Ambrose, who had been the principal instrument of his conversion; and he resolved on ridding himself of his worldly possessions, except what might be necessary for his bare subsistence, and retiring to Africa, with the purpose of following the rule of life which it had cost him so severe a struggle to adopt. Thagaste, his native place, was his first abode, and he stationed himself in the suburbs, so as to be at once in retirement and in the way of usefulness, if any opening should offer in the city. His conversion had been followed by some of his friends, who, together with certain of his fellow-citizens, whom he succeeded in persuading, joined him, and who naturally looked up to him as the head of their religious community. Their property was cast into a common stock, whence distribution was made according to the need of each. Fasting and prayer, almsgiving and Scripture-reading, were their stated occupations; and Augustine took upon himself



the task of instructing them and variously aiding them. The consequence naturally was, that while he busied himself in assisting others in devotional habits, his own leisure was taken from him. His fame spread, and serious engagements were pressed upon him of a nature little congenial with the life to which he had hoped to dedicate himself. Indeed, his talents were of too active and influential a character to allow of his secluding himself from the world, however he might wish it.

Thus he passed the first three years of his return to Africa, at the end of which time, a.d. 389, he was admitted into holy orders. The circumstances under which this change of state took place are curious, and, as in the instance of other Fathers, characteristic of the early times. His reputation having become considerable, he was afraid to approach any place where a bishop was wanted, lest he should be forcibly consecrated to the see. He seems to have set his heart on remaining for a time a layman, from a feeling of the responsibility of the ministerial commission. He considered he had not yet mastered the nature and the duties of it. But it so happened, that at the time in question, an imperial agent or commissioner, living at Hippo, a Christian and a serious man, signified his desire to have some conversation with him, as to a design he had of quitting secular pursuits and devoting himself to a religious life. This brought Augustine to Hippo, whither he went with the less anxiety, because that city had at that time a bishop in the person of Valerius. However, it so happened that a presbyter was wanted there, though a bishop was not; and Augustine, little suspicious of what was to happen, joined the congregation in which the election was to take place. When Valerius addressed the people and demanded whom they desired for their pastor, they at once named the stranger, whose reputation had already spread among them. Augustine burst into tears, and some of the people, mistaking the cause of

his agitation, observed to him that though the presbyterate was lower than his desert, yet, notwithstanding, it stood next to the episcopate. His ordination followed, as to which Valerius himself, being a Greek, and unable to speak Latin fluently, was chiefly influenced by a wish to secure an able preacher in his own place. It may be remarked, as a singular custom in the African Church hitherto, that presbyters either never preached, or never in the presence of a bishop. Valerius was the first to break through the rule in favour of Augustine.

On his coming to Hippo, Valerius gave him a garden belonging to the Church to build a monastery upon; and shortly afterwards we find him thanking Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, for bestowing an estate either on the brotherhood of Hippo or of Thagaste. Soon after we hear of monasteries at Carthage, and other places, besides two additional ones at Hippo. Others branched off from his own community, which he took care to make also a school or seminary of the Church. It became an object with the African Churches to obtain clergy from him. Possidius, his pupil and friend, mentions as many as ten bishops out of his own acquaintance, who had been supplied from the school of Augustine.

\* \* \*

Little more need be said to conclude this sketch of eventful history. Many years had not passed before Valerius, feeling the infirmities of age, appointed Augustine as his co-adjutor in the see of Hippo, and in this way secured his succeeding him on his death; an object which he had much at heart, but which he feared might be frustrated by Augustine's being called to the government of some other church. This elevation necessarily produced some change in the accidents of his life, but his personal habits remained the

same. He left his monastery, as being too secluded for an office which especially obliges its holder to the duties of hospitality; and he formed a religious and clerical community in the episcopal house. This community consisted chiefly of presbyters, deacons, and sub-deacons, who gave up all personal property, and were supported upon a common fund. He himself strictly conformed to the rule he imposed on others. Far from appropriating to any private purpose any portion of his ecclesiastical income, he placed the whole charge of it in the hands of his clergy, who took by turns the yearly management of it, he being auditor of their accounts. He never indulged himself in house or land, considering the property of the see as little his own as those private possessions, which he had formerly given up. He employed it, in one way or other, directly or indirectly, as if it were the property of the poor, the ignorant, and the sinful. He had "counted the cost," and he acted like a man whose slowness to begin a course was a pledge of zeal when he had once begun it.

# Death of Augustine

*-from Newman's Sketch, "Augustine and the Vandals"*

The luminous judgment, the calm faith, and the single-minded devotion which this letter to Honoratus exhibits, were fully maintained in the conduct of the far-famed writer, in the events which followed. It was written on the first entrance of the Vandals into Africa, about two years before they laid siege to Hippo; and during this interval of dreadful suspense and excitement, as well as of actual suffering, amid the desolation of the Church around him, with the prospect of his own personal trials, we find this unwearied teacher carrying on his works of love by pen, and word of mouth, eagerly, as knowing his time was short, but tranquilly, as if it were a season of prosperity. He commenced a fresh work against the opinions of Julian, a friend of his, who, beginning to run well, had unhappily taken up a bold profession of Pelaginizism; he wrote a treatise on Predestination, at the suggestion of his friends, to meet the objections urged against former works of his on the same subject; sustained a controversy with the Arians; and began a history of heresies. What makes Augustine's diligence in the duties of his episcopate, at this season the more remarkable, is, that he was actually engaged at the same time in political affairs, as a confidential friend and counsellor of Boniface, the governor of Africa (who had first invited and then opposed the entrance of the Vandals), and accordingly was in circumstances especially likely to unsettle and agitate the mind of an aged man.

At length events hastened on to a close. Fugitive multitudes betook themselves to Hippo. Boniface threw himself into it. The Vandals appeared before it, and laid siege to it.

Meanwhile, Augustine fell ill. He had about him many of the African bishops, and among other friends, Possidius, whose account of his last hours is preserved to us. "We used continually to converse together," says Possidius, "about the misfortunes in which we were involved, and contemplated God's tremendous judgments which were before our eyes, saying, 'Thou art just, O Lord, and Thy judgment is right.' One day, at meal time, as we talked together, he said, 'Know ye that in this our present calamity, I pray God to vouchsafe to rescue this besieged city, or (if otherwise) to give His servants strength to bear His will, or, at least, to take me to Himself out of this world.' We followed his advice, and both ourselves, and our friends, and the whole city offered up the same prayer with him. On the third month of the siege he was seized with a fever, and took to his bed, and was reduced to the extreme of sickness."

Thus, the latter part of his prayer was put in train for accomplishment, as the former part was subsequently granted by the retreat of the enemy from Hippo. But to continue the narrative of Possidius: "He had been used to say, in his familiar conversation, that after receiving baptism, even approved Christians and priests ought not to depart from the body without a fitting and sufficient course of penance. Accordingly, in the last illness, of which he died, he set himself to write out the special penitential psalms of David, and to place them four by four against the wall, so that, as he lay in bed, in the days of his sickness, he could see them. And so he used to read and weep abundantly. And lest his attention should be distracted by any one, about ten days before his death, he begged us who were with him to hinder persons entering his room except at the times when his medical attendants came to see him, or his meals were brought to him. This was strictly attended to, and all his time given to prayer. Till this last illness, he had been able to preach the word of God in the church without intermission

with energy and boldness, with healthy mind and judgment. He slept with his fathers in a good old age, sound in limb, unimpaired in sight, and hearing, and, as it is written, while we stood by, beheld, and prayed with him. We took part in the sacrifice to God at his funeral, and so buried him."

Though the Vandals failed in their first attack upon Hippo, during Augustine's last illness, they renewed it shortly after his death, under more favourable circumstances. Boniface was defeated in the field, and retired to Italy; and the inhabitants of Hippo left their city. The Vandals entered and burned it, excepting the library of Augustine, which was providentially preserved.

The desolation which, at that era, swept over the face of Africa, was completed by the subsequent invasion of the Saracens. Its five hundred churches are no more. The voyager gazes on the sullen rocks which line its coast, and discovers no token of Christianity to cheer the gloom. Hippo has ceased to be an episcopal city; but its great Teacher, though dead, yet speaks; his voice is gone out into all lands, and his words unto the ends of the world. He needs no dwelling place, whose home is the Catholic Church; he fears no barbarian or heretical desolation, whose creed is destined to last unto the end.

## Monica's Last Prayer



"Ah! could thy grave, at home, at Carthage be!"  
Care not for that, and lay me where I fall!  
Everywhere heard will be the judgment call;  
But at God's altar, oh! remember me.

Thus Monica, and died in Italy.  
Yet fervent had her longing been, through all

Her course, for home at last, and burial  
With her own husband, by the Libyan sea.

Had been! but at the end, to her pure soul  
All tie with all beside seemed vain and cheap,  
And union before God the only care.

Creeds pass, rites change, no altar standeth whole.  
Yet we her memory, as she prayed, will keep,  
Keep by this: Life with God, and union there!

- *Matthew Arnold*



# **Chronological Table of the Life of Augustine**

- 354. Augustine is born.
- 371. His father, Patricius, dies a Christian.
- 373. Augustine joins the Manichees.
- 376. Teaches rhetoric at Carthage.
- 383. Goes to Rome.
- 384. Goes to Milan.
- 386. Augustine is converted.
- 387. Is baptized by Saint Ambrose.
- 387. His mother, Saint Monica, dies.
- 388. Settles at Thagaste.
- 389. Is ordained priest at Hippo.
- 395. Is consecrated coadjutor to Valerius.
- 398. Writes his Confessions.
- 430. Augustine dies.

## About This EBook

The text of this ebook was taken from the book *Conversion of Augustine* by Saint John Henry Newman, edited by James McDonald. The edition used was published in San Francisco, California in 1908. It indicates that the text was extracted from the Newman's *Historical Sketches*.

The cover image is a detail of a fresco depicting the conversion of Saint Augustine by Johann Baptist Zimmermann, 1729. The original is in the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Weyarn, Miesbach, Bavaria, Germany. It was photographed on 23 March 2017 by GFreihalter, and swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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